

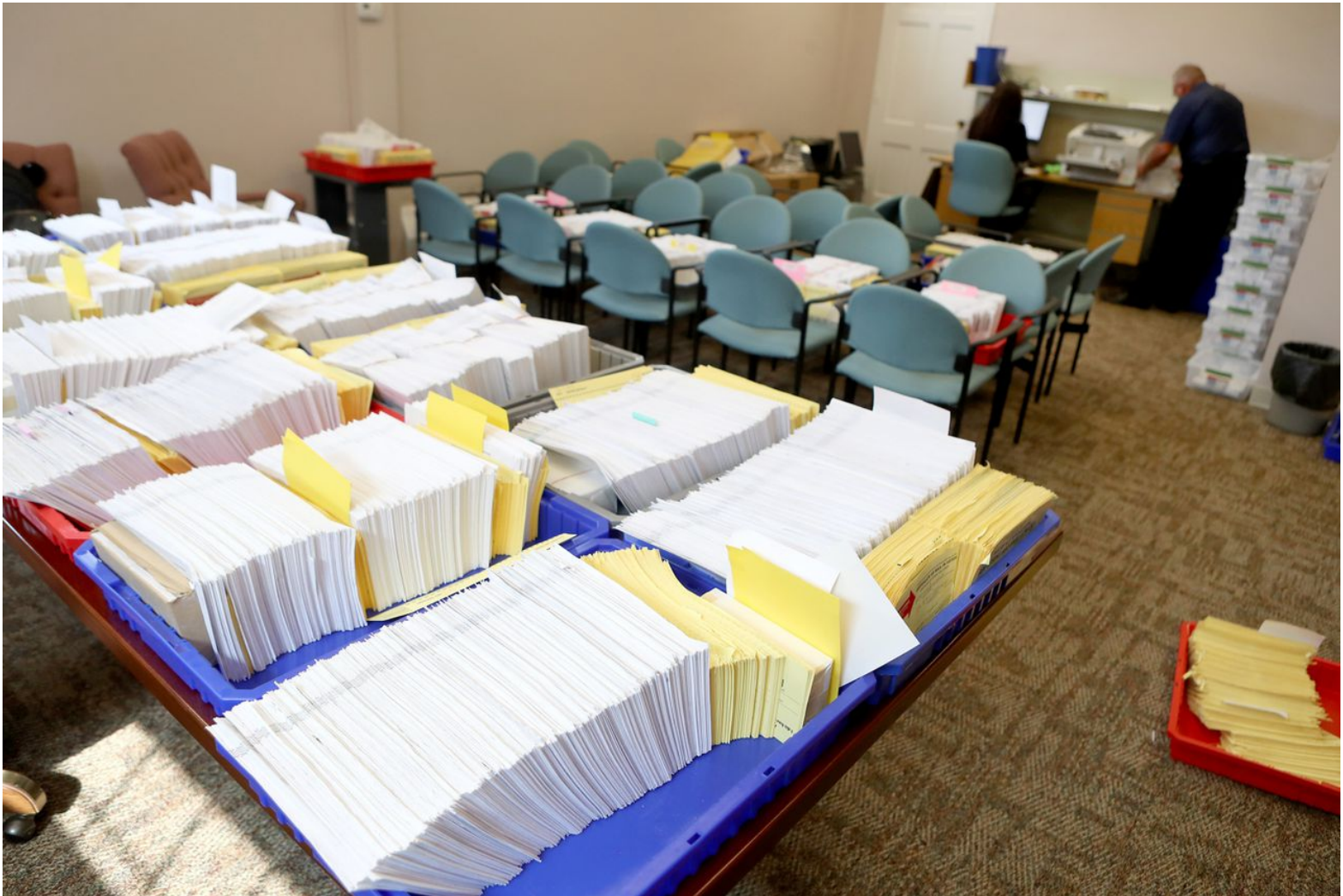
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Politics

Can vote-by-mail be fixed for November election? Election officials warn of problems.

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Mike Kennedy, democratic registrar for the Cape May County Board of Elections and Cheryl Holmes, of Dominion Voting, count ballots at the Cape May County Board of Elections, Tuesday, July 7, 2020. Tim Hawk | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

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By Katie Kausch | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Returned ballots, misprinted ballots, and significant mail delays were just some issues New Jersey voters encountered during the July mail-in primary, and county clerks say significant improvements would have to be made if the November election is held the same way.

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Lack of awareness surrounding the elections was one of the biggest hurdles counties has to overcome, Mercer County Clerk Paula Sollami-Covello told NJ Advance Media this week as county offices neared the end of a three-week stint of finalizing results.

“We had quite a few people that were saying, ‘why did I get a ballot mailed to me?’ because they didn’t know that was the way that the governor had ordered the election to be conducted for this election,” Sollami-Covello said, saying a lack of voter awareness was just one of the issues her office faced in the primary election.

Less than 20% of New Jersey voters knew the election had been moved to July, a Rutgers Eagleton poll found.

“The state really didn’t step up on (education). I never saw any of their stuff. They claim they did a campaign but I never saw it,” Hunterdon County Clerk Mary Melfi told NJ Advance Media.

Early education will be key to a smooth November election, both clerks said.



“We know November is coming, and we know more or less that we’re going to be dealing in some way with the coronavirus,” Sollami-Covello said. “I hope we get some kind of information, it will just help us in planning and preparing.”

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Spokeswomen for the governor's office and the Division of Elections declined to comment Thursday morning. A plan for the general election has not yet been announced.

Having advance notice of how the election will be conducted will allow clerks' offices to begin printing and designing the ballots, and order larger-than-usual amounts of mailing supplies, like envelopes, Sollami-Covello said.

In a typical election, Mercer County needs about 27,000 envelopes, Sollami-Covello said. This year, her office sent out about 250,000 pieces of mail.

That number includes ballots sent to all registered Democrats and Republicans, and party affiliation forms for all unaffiliated voters.

Should all registered voters automatically receive a mail-in ballot this fall, that could place a significant strain on the postal system, both said. There were over six million registered voters in New Jersey during the 2019 general election.

"Despite being told, years ago, that election mail had priority, the postal officials advised the clerks some elections mail did not have priority including some of our sample ballots," Sollami-Covello said, adding that it caused delays.

Some completed ballots were mailed back to senders after the post office scanned the wrong barcodes, and the USPS could see significant delays in November, Melfi said.

"When you have the entire state voting by mail you need to have the post office has to be prepared for it," Sollami-Covello said.

Having ballots automatically sent also creates the possibility that deceased voters, or voters who have since moved and registered elsewhere, would get a ballot, Melfi said. Voters are typically only removed from the rolls if the clerk's office is informed they're no longer eligible to vote in that county.

Melfi said her office got back about 1,500 ballots that they sent out, something she attributed to "garbage data" in the system.

"It just doesn't give a lot of confidence in the system" when erroneous ballots go out, she said.

Both clerks said they saw higher voter turn-out, but that the bulk of votes were cast through the mail. Official voter turn-out numbers were not yet available.



Voters were able to cast provisional ballots at limited polling locations, and ballot

booths were available to voters with disabilities.

Melfi believes it will be possible to have wide-spread in-person voting in November, should the severity of the pandemic remain the same, and that in-person voting could have safely happened in July.

“There were people who wanted to vote on a machine,” she said. “Everything loosened up, you also had (Murphy) at the center of the (George Floyd) protest, and then people were just very, very angry that they couldn’t vote on the machine.”

When asked if the issues her office encountered during the July primary could be remedied, Melfi was blunt. “No, I don’t think it would be fixed in time for the November election,” she told NJ Advance Media.

A Division of Elections subcommittee made up of clerks from several counties will be meeting with officials from the governor’s office in the coming weeks to discuss how the general election will be conducted, Sollami-Covello said.

“We asked that the governor notify us what type of election we’re going to be having no later than August 10, which is the date of the drawing for the county to draw the ballot positions,” Sollami-Covello said.

Support for a primarily mail-in election was sharply divided among party lines, a Rutgers Eagleton poll published in May found. Seventy percent of Democrats supported voting by mail, while 72% of Republicans opposed it.

“The New Jersey GOP strongly opposes an all-mail election similar to the Primary for the Fall Elections. There were dozens of problems, both big and small, and it’s impossible for people to have confidence in this system,” New Jersey Republican Chairman Doug Steinhardt said, citing rejected ballots, ballots sent to deceased voters, and issues with the USPS as causes for concern.

Philip Swibinski, a spokesman for the New Jersey State Democratic Committee, called the primary “by and large a success.”

“(Murphy) was able to find a solution that allowed people to exercise their vote in a safe way and provide flexibility for people, particularly in urban areas, where there are difficulties voting by mail,” Swibinski said, referring to the ballot drop boxes and provisional in-person voting.



It was still too early to make a judgement for the November election, Swibinski said, adding, "Everyone's preference is to have a traditional election if that is safe, but I think the governor will make the best decision for the state."

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